
Interview: Admiral Wesley McDonald

Huge Soviet Atlantic maneuvers demonstrate new naval capabilities

This interview with Adm. Wesley McDonald, Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, U.S. Atlantic Command, and U.S. Atlantic Fleet, was conducted at SACLANT headquarters in Norfolk, Va. on Aug. 21.

Admiral McDonald graduated from the Naval Academy in 1946. He later commanded Attack Squadron 56, where he led the first strike into North Vietnam following the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964.

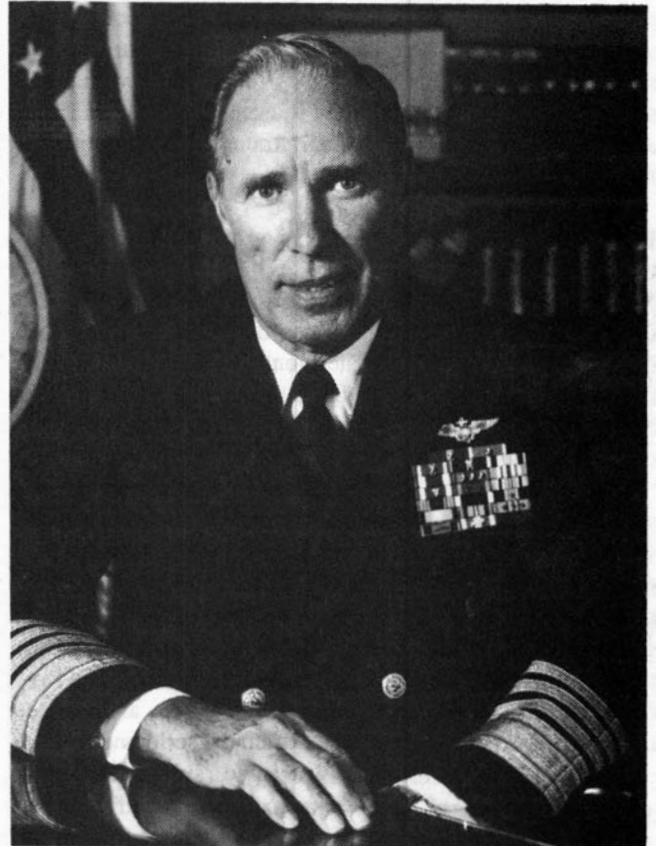
Progressing through a wide variety of commands in the Pacific and Atlantic theaters, he was promoted to the rank of admiral and assumed the position of Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic on Sept. 30, 1982.

Admiral McDonald will likely be the last commander to hold all three of the commands involving the Atlantic Forces simultaneously, as President Reagan has elevated Vice Admiral Carlisle A. H. Trost to the rank of admiral and the post of Commander in Chief of the Atlantic Fleet.

This command will make use of the admiral billet left vacant when the naval materials command was reorganized earlier this year, and will allow the Navy to maintain maximum concentration on the Central American region, while fulfilling the extensive responsibilities to NATO described by Admiral McDonald below.

EIR: How would you compare last year's Soviet naval maneuvers in the Atlantic with the recently completed exercises?

McDonald: There were significant differences, but first let me go back a bit and situate this. The maneuvers last year occurred immediately following a NATO exercise which took place across the Atlantic, with its main thrust in the Norwegian Sea. It was designed to give credence to our strategic aim of being forward deployed, and to underline the importance of Norway and the Northern Flank to the alliance and to the whole maritime battle we see shaping up. A lot of people ask, "What does the Norwegian Sea have to do with the North Atlantic and the sea lines of communication?" Well, if you don't contain the Soviet Northern Fleet (the largest they have in capabilities as well as numbers), and it should come out uncontested into the North Atlantic, your sea lines are absolutely at risk; I don't have the forces to protect those if the Soviets have free rein in the North Atlantic.



Once outside of the GIUK gap, in later years, not now, with tactical air at sea, that is a very, very formidable threat to the United States Navy, to the allied navies in the North Atlantic, and certainly to the survivability and sustainability of Europe.

EIR: What developments are you referring to when you speak of later years?

McDonald: I see the Soviet Navy building their first true aircraft carrier, which we think is going to be named "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," a nuclear-powered ship carrying conventional-type craft, and this will be the forerunner of tactical air/carrier battle group operations, as we know them in the United States Navy—as the Brits used to have—to contest our dominance. Once they do that, they can provide at least tactical air cover outside the range of land-based

air, which they can't do right now. Take all the new classes of surface ships the Soviets are bringing into their inventory and place them in the middle of the Atlantic, and we'll kill them. Up in the Norwegian Sea, the Barents, with air cover, it is a much tougher job for us. Outside the GIUK gap, without any kind of tactical air to cover those ships, as our carriers do for our surface action groups, they're at risk. They know that.

You can provide a lot of protection with submarines, but then you're tying submarines up to do things that maybe you don't want them to do. Submarines should be out killing submarines; that's where we intend to employ our submarines, and I'm sure that's what they intend to do with their submarines. Plus, we think they'll use an awful lot of their attack submarines to protect their strategic ballistic missile force submarines.

EIR: Last year you were quoted saying NATO was surprised by the maneuver.

McDonald: I wish I had never used that word. Words can take on a journalistic meaning you don't intend. . . . The thing I was "surprised" about was the rapidity with which they turned around from a surveillance role of the U.S./NATO forces operating in the Norwegian Sea, and "ginned up" a relatively large force exercising on their own in their "Spring EX," as we called it in '84. I don't think I was surprised that they had that capability, we've known that; what I was concerned about was that they did in fact turn the number of ships around as quickly as they did, showing that they now had in-port logistic supports that maybe we hadn't given them credit for, better maintenance capabilities, and these kind of things that you don't generally look at. The fact that they got most of their submarines out of port, at the same time, showed a strong command and control of maneuver.

This year, this exercise was pretty well predicted, some months in advance. There was an exchange of information among individual nations which were able to pick up these types of reports, that were shared, and so NATO was not "surprised" by the operation. We were curious about the number of forces that went to sea this time, which was a bit unexpected. We saw them doing an exercise that was, as I say, predictable, but in numbers that were not as easily perceived until we saw them start to move out. This was the largest sea exercise that the Soviets have engaged in, as far as we know, in the history of their modern navy. The thing that impressed me was that they were reflecting good command and control as far as placing their forces where they wanted them to be. They were exercising those forces as counters to their perception of how we would execute a support of Norway and the Norwegian Sea, and they were doing this in an area much farther forward than we have seen them operate in the past.

We saw them put more attack submarines in the central

Atlantic, basically "off our coast." I don't mean to imply hysteria—they weren't in the Chesapeake Bay or anything like that—but we saw attack submarines in larger numbers and in areas where we had not seen those numbers before.

EIR: One of the hallmarks of the "Ogarkov Doctrine" is a perfection of the ability to mobilize forces with no warning. Is this what is being tested on the naval side?

McDonald: I don't see it as *no* warning for mobilization. For naval ships to truly respond, there has to be a period of grooming, and you have to have those ships back in home port, or those ships have to be looked at someplace else, and there are other ways of determining that steps are being made to integrate total forces.

I don't think—and I may be wrong—that with the intelligence capabilities we have today, the Soviets can "go to war with no warning." I think there is going to be warning—whether that warning is *adequate* enough depends on how well we are trained to respond and what the word "adequate" means.

EIR: What additional capabilities would you like to see in response to this?

McDonald: The U.S. Navy has certainly led the alliance with a forward-thinking building program for its maritime forces, and I'd like to see, obviously, our maritime partners do the same thing. However, there are tough priorities each of the democracies has to face up to, whether to do a land-based, sea-based or air [defense buildup], as the case may be, and each nation is examining it.

. . . There are things in certain areas of maritime warfare that can be critical. One is in escort ships. Some cargo ships and merchant ships are not going to need, nor are they going to get, escorts all the way across the Atlantic. They're fast enough that to put a combatant with them will just slow them down, so let those fast guys go, get them over there. Then look at defended lanes, and certain areas where you know you suspect submarine packs, or submarines can be operating there, such as the southwest approaches, or turning north from the Azores, or coming past Iceland (if we are able to use those kinds of routes), and concentrate your escorts as needed. I need more escorts to do the job. Escorts also provide me with the dual capability, in most cases, of anti-submarine warfare (ASW), and that is an area that is absolutely essential that we pay more attention to.

EIR: In the recent maneuvers, we saw the use of the Baltic Fleet, especially marine units from that fleet, operating in the Atlantic area, which seems to underline Soviet appreciation of the importance of the Northern Flank.

McDonald: Your observations are basically correct; the Soviets did use an amphibious force to make an amphibious landing in the northern regions of the Soviet Union. We've

seen them practice before, in the Baltic, and on the Kola peninsula: This time they did combine forces and did that so that they had a larger force to control, a more reasonable naval infantry force to make a significant landing, and the coordination to make a successful landing.

The fact that they came out of the Baltic provides them with training too. I would not see that generally happening [in time of war]. The Baltic naval infantry would probably have a higher priority than trying to run out through the straits there in Denmark and expose itself into the open Atlantic, and run past Norway—if Norway were still an entity; and obviously they wouldn't be going there except to practice.

You and I can create scenarios for where they would land on Jutland or on the Baltic side or into West Germany or something like that, to have a flanking movement on the

I am deeply concerned about the reduction of what we have perceived to be a reasonable "plus" on our side. Where the technological gap used to be very broad, with the Soviets trying to catch up, they are now really closing in. When you look at the new class of submarines they have coming out, they are, in fact, much quieter, making the ASW problem much more difficult for us.

central front. This reemphasizes some of their developing capabilities that we've got to pay attention to—and we are paying attention to them. I would offer that in an exercise like this, there are certain constraints that are there, as you sit back and watch, that would not necessarily apply in a wartime environment. First of all, given adequate warning, I don't think we're going to just give Soviet units and Warsaw Pact units free passage out of the Baltic. That is going to be a very highly contested area.

So I feel we've got to look at this thing in perspective: Did they get training? Absolutely. Did we learn something? Absolutely. I see this past exercise, as large as it was, as significant in several ways. One, it gave a chance for the world to look on and say, "Hey, the strategy we had thought the Soviets had been operating with in the past is now changing." We've read that kind of thing in the development of

their fleet and the integration of their combined arms, if you will, Soviet air with the surface (meaning army) and with the maritime forces. . . . It means that we've got to sharpen our training, be alert to their capabilities and to deal with potential intentions. That's difficult to do at times; capabilities are fairly easy to deal with, and I have the stuff to deal with it, but it's intentions that always leave you with your tactics to play with.

. . . Norway is absolutely essential to us, absolutely vital to the whole alliance, sometimes overlooked by our political masters in Europe, because they keep looking to the Central Front, but I tell you, if the North collapses and the South collapses, the Central Front is in dire jeopardy. General [Bernard] Rogers . . . has been most supportive, as I go around and talk in Europe about the importance of Norway, because it's important to him. I can't afford to let the Soviets have access to the Atlantic, and make the Norwegian Sea a sanctuary; you can't do that and survive. Iceland is equally important as a base of ASW activity and "early eyes" surveillance—we're there to defend Iceland.

EIR: The Soviets have devoted much effort to improving their submarine capabilities. What developments in quieting submarines were displayed by the Soviets in their recent exercise?

McDonald: They confirmed those things that we had seen individually, but of course they did it in larger numbers, and we are concerned about it. I am deeply concerned about the reduction of what we have perceived to be a reasonable "plus" on our side. Where the technological gap used to be very broad, with the Soviets trying to catch up, they are now really closing in. When you look at the new class of submarines they have coming out, they are, in fact, as you said, *much* quieter, making the ASW problem much more difficult for us.

They're exercising at sea much more than they have in the past—I don't mean just this year, but look back 15 years ago, and then come back to today—Soviet submarine commanders are exercising significantly more at sea, therefore they're becoming better, they're learning tactics better, they're learning ways to counter those tactics that we have. The whole problem is getting tougher.

As that technology gap continues to close—whether it is stolen from us, or pulled out of publications that are open market, unclassified—that transfer of technology that [former CIA Deputy Director] Bobby Inman keeps preaching about is a real threat to our long-term survivability. Right now we still have an edge over the Soviets in ASW. They're working hard to improve their own, and they're doing it in numbers that are going to continue to harass us, even though they may not have the technology as far as towed arrays, and sonars, and ASW aircraft proficiencies. They're working all those areas; it's a matter of time before they're going to get

there, and how good our scientists are to keep us ahead.

EIR: In their Atlantic exercises, did the Soviets demonstrate a capability to use the submarine-launched missile forces, and submarine-launched cruise missiles, as a “pin-down” force directed at U.S. strategic capabilities?

McDonald: I’m not sure I buy the thesis that they would exercise that capability, which obviously they’re developing. Do I think they would do that, or have the capability to do it? They don’t have the capability now. They are developing, certainly, those kinds of capabilities, it’s a matter of time. What you see in a cruise missile is a challenging thing. Do you let the cruise missiles keep coming, and make the assumption that they’re conventional? Or do you make the assumption that they’re nuclear? My first thought, as a military man, is, “My god, they’ve started a nuclear attack”—and that has to be geared with a full interchange of ICBMs.

EIR: But under those conditions, which we could call the worst case, or maximum. . . .

McDonald: Would they pin down U.S. forces? Well, I think that U.S. forces would already be deployed at that time. There’s enough warning, and things that would’ve taken place before that ever would take place. They’re not suddenly going to get off the East Coast without us knowing about it, unless a lot of other things have happened. There are systems we have, that work, intelligence systems that would give us that, and we would start moving also. Remember that U.S. strategy and NATO strategy is to move as early as possible.

EIR: Do we need more prepositioned materiel in Norway?

McDonald: We are prepositioning significant amounts of stocks, but you can carry prepositioning too far. The more you have prepositioned, the more problems you face, keeping it up, replacing it, as the case may be, protecting it. Once you put it there, there’s nothing that tells me that the Soviets are not going to know where it is, and therefore that’s going to be one of the early targets. And it costs you double, because if you’re going to preposition it, you can’t use it for training.

If you’ve got plenty of it there, lots in Norway, lots in Denmark, lots in Germany, and if we can afford all that sustainability, then you’ve got a lot going for you. We don’t have that today, so it’s a tough tradeoff, because General Rogers and his commanders are going to need it shortly after the shooting starts. If you tell me 30 days ahead of time that we ought to start moving—best of all worlds—we’ll start moving stuff forward and we’ll get it there. Maybe the Soviets look at that and say, well, they’ll get tired, we’ll back off for another two years, and they’ll get tired and take the stuff all home, the next time we won’t give them as much warning.

EIR: What will the *Ocean Safari* maneuvers, which are

about to begin, be dealing with?

McDonald: *Ocean Safari* is going to be looking at hiring on some ships, doing some escort, playing some kind of power projection in the North Atlantic, up into Norway, with a carrier battle group to operate in one of the fjords up there. How do you operate if you get there early? What are the best tactics to use? I said that we weren’t surprised this year, but nevertheless, there were about 40 NATO ships participating off and on during this exercise, doing surveillance, and it was a good show, as far as all the nations getting a chance to see the Soviets operate, in large numbers.

That was one of the impressive things. They have built this large fleet, now they’re able to put it together, given time to plan, and they now provide their own opposition. They can now be both “blue and orange,” just as we play our war games; and they’re not just dependent on U.S. forces or NATO forces operating in their areas, they can go out and try to do some tactics on us. Now they can create their own game, so to speak, and that’s what they did.

They brought a task force out of the Baltic; they brought one out of the Mediterranean; they brought a couple down from the north, turned them all around and ran them back up as we would have, if we were going to go into the Norwegian Sea. Ran them through a couple barriers of submarines and surface action groups. The Kiev played a double role—she came out and played a strike as the Kiev would, we would presume, against a U.S. battle group—then turned around and played the U.S. side, and let them strike her as she went on up to the north. They really did a very fine operation.

EIR: What is your evaluation of the readiness of the NATO navies?

McDonald: Actually the state of readiness of the NATO navies is pretty daggone good. I’ve been to Germany most recently, and I’m very impressed with the German Navy, they have some good ships, they’re continuing their building program with the six new frigate types that are coming down the road and some new submarines. The British Navy has always been a leader of professionalism in that part of the world, though their forces have declined over the last 10 years—now they seem to have leveled off, thank goodness. And we depend very heavily on British expertise in ASW, and they are good, as are the Dutch.

The Norwegians have a smaller navy, but their navy provides the type of support that we would hope to get in the Norwegian fjords, with their smaller submarines, which are really coastal submarines, but nevertheless very helpful in that particular area. They have a few frigates which are good ships, well-manned, and well-trained. I find that the NATO navies are pretty well-trained. In fact, when we have the Standing Naval Force Atlantic, which is the only force that exists in peacetime that I actually command as Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, we find that the NATO navies

do as well, if not better, in certain areas than the U.S. ship that's in that force on a day-to-day basis.

EIR: Any comments on what you would like to see if the Spanish Navy were integrated into NATO?

McDonald: I don't want to get out in front and try to lay out any perceptions that I have on how to use the Spanish Navy, because the Spanish Navy is obviously going to play a role in the Mediterranean, but I think they also have some contribution to make to the Atlantic, and particularly to the Straits of Gibraltar. We need, again, all the ASW escorts that we can get, and the Spanish have a very formidable navy, compared to some of the other navies. The Portuguese are successfully concluding an agreement to purchase three new MIKO class frigates from the Germans. That's ongoing right now, and that will help update the Portuguese Navy, which needs them very badly, and which I need as SACLANT command.

EIR: Any comments on Soviet sub operations under the Arctic ice?

McDonald: We expect the Soviets to use the ice, as we have. They can position in those kind of areas, and put at risk targets in the United States, if they can 1) fire through the ice, or 2) operate in ice-free areas, smaller areas that they can slide in and out of, and we honestly expect to see that and we're paying attention to that as one of the challenges that the Soviet Navy, as it gets more modern, more sophisticated, and more capable, will present to the United States and to the alliance.

EIR: What lessons would you draw from naval build-ups like the one the Soviets are currently conducting?

McDonald: You can see in the past a certain lethargy which set in in the free world, again with competition for how you spend your dollars, and what priorities you place on them. We've seen people, like the Hitlers and the others, who built these very complete war machines for their times, and we paid attention to it, but we really didn't get motivated to address that early on.

I think that in today's world, the media has served a great purpose in keeping the people more alert to what the challenges are. Unfortunately, we in the services have certain constraints, and I will point to the intelligence communities right now and say that I think that they, because of the information they have, and because of the national constraints on releasing that information, have got to be more realistic in alerting the people to what the true threat is. And I think the people of the free world, knowing what the threats are to their freedom and things like that, will respond appropriately.

We're just not going to have the time, from the industrial base that we've had in the past, to regenerate and do the things that you and I have seen the United States do, and the

members of the alliance do, in times of stress. It's not that we're not being straightforward, but we're just being restrictive of some of the information that we have available, that most of the leadership is aware of, but the man on the street doesn't understand. Therefore there is a certain degree of skepticism about the need for what the military keeps trying to sell to the Congress, and what the man in the street perceives as really a lot of brass-polishing. Being a little bit more straightforward about what the threat really is, what the capabilities of the threat really are, we would be a bit more prepared than we have been in the past. I think the Soviet efforts to improve themselves and improve their capabilities have alerted us to the fact that they really aren't this little coastal defense navy, or this totally land-oriented power.

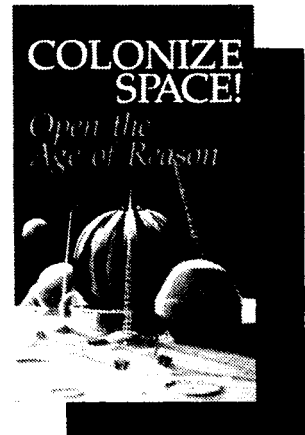
If the alliance acts prudently and with a degree of urgency, we can come out on top in any of the places we go. My main concern right now is that I cannot do everything at the same time, with the forces that are available to me, where the Soviets might want to challenge us—Mediterranean, Caribbean, North Atlantic, Norwegian Sea. It's going to be very difficult to do all at the same time, and we may have to end up by prioritizing.

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